



**DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION, PARKS
AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES**

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James B. Spengler, Director

Park and Recreation Commission

January 21, 2015

Mayor William Euille
Vice Mayor Allison Silberberg
Councilman John Taylor Chapman
Councilman Timothy B. Lovain
Councilwoman Redella S. Pepper
Councilman Paul C. Smedberg
Councilman Justin M. Wilson

Re: Cameron Run Regional Park

Dear Mayor Euille and City Council Members:

The Park and Recreation Commission strongly and unanimously urges you not to approve a lease extension to the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority for the Cameron Run Regional Park at this time. Approval of an agreement to that effect would be grossly premature and staggering in its departure from the City's commitment to public engagement.

Background

On January 15, 2015, the Park and Recreation Commission approved the Cameron Run Recreational Area Initial Coordinated Park and Open Space Plan. This plan, just like each one of the other large-park plans that has come before you, takes into account the current and future needs of City residents, as identified in a statistically sound needs assessment conducted by the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities ("RPCA") and through public comment. And, like each one of those large park plans, the plan for the Cameron Run area is part of a long-running, resource-intensive citywide park planning effort in which staff and the Commission have been deeply involved.

The plan for Cameron Run fills an important gap. It indicates areas for both active and passive recreation, identifies natural areas that should be protected, and identifies areas for connectivity and natural hiking trails—two features at the very top of the list of amenities the public wants. While the plan indicates areas for active recreation, it does not do so in terms of the

existing use. In other words, while the current area that encompasses the Great Waves Waterpark and the batting cages is identified as “active recreation,” that designation does not require that the active use be what it is now. That area could be the water park or it could be any number of things including a large swimming complex, an indoor/outdoor recreation facility, or ball fields.

In connection with our review, the Commission learned that the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority (NVRPA) is seeking a forty-year extension of their current lease of the land for the purpose of continuing the current uses.¹ It appears that the request has been placed on a fast track for approval, both as an informal matter (with lobbying of Council members to this end) and as a semi-formal arrangement within the City Manager’s Office. The Commission learned that the City anticipated making a decision on the leasing agreement with the NVRPA in February 2015, more than six years before the current lease expires.

The View of the Unanimous Commission

We will not mince words: The Commission strongly urges Council to defer action on the lease extension at this time. Any such action would be taken in a vacuum—without consideration of three decades of demographic changes in the City since the original lease was executed, or the deficits in the recreation services the City currently provides (aquatics, e.g.). There is demand for more; if Cameron Run Regional Park presents opportunities for providing it, the City has an obligation to consider those opportunities.

As you know, the area of the city surrounding this park is going through a significant planning process. Major development is happening on both ends of the Eisenhower Valley, including major residential development. As our City continues down this path, public needs for park and recreation space are changing in both degree and kind. Indeed, as our open space resources dwindle and our population increases (particularly in this area of the City), it is critical that the City make the most effective possible use of its open space. Typically, open space and park usage plans are revisited every fifteen to twenty years, and many have argued that the cycle should be shorter where rapid development is occurring.

Given these circumstances, it makes no sense at all for the City to tie up this significant portion of public open space for the next forty years now. And it certainly does not make sense to do so as currently contemplated, without consideration of future alternative uses of the space and without public input in accord with the City’s public engagement process. More time has been spent agreeing on temporary uses of half-acre portions of land than has been devoted to the proposed use of this 36-acre parcel for the next forty years.

There are more than six years remaining on the current lease. The Commission appreciates the NVRPA’s desire for certainty in its future operations, particularly where it is considering additional investment in the water park. We do not dispute that the water park provides the City with amenities that many residents enjoy. However, when pressed at our November hearing as to the reason for a lease term of forty years, the representative of the NVRPA gave no reason other than that is the longest term they could get. (And, at the

¹ It has yet to be made clear whether the action requested is an extension, renewal, or entirely new lease. We use “extension” as a shorthand here.

Commission's January meeting, we heard that this is the longest-term city attorneys believe is defensible "in court.")

NVRPA's desire for certainty is not a sufficient reason – not even close – for the City to ignore its commitment to its residents.

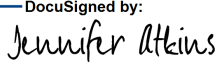
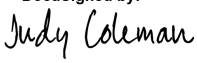
Recommendation

We urge Council refrain from acting on the lease at this time and to direct the City Manager, through RPCA, to have staff conduct a review – efficiently, but fairly – of current and potential uses of the site, with a deliverable to the Commission for public hearing. This review should cover:

- Changes in conditions (demographic, budgetary, etc.) in the three decades since the City agreed to the initial lease.²
- Current uses of the land, including operating seasons and hours.
- Uses identified in the current needs assessment and the approved park plan.
- Potential alternative uses, city-run or otherwise, consistent with resident needs and existing plans.
- Issues identified in a public engagement process akin to that used by RPCA in the context of other large-park planning initiatives.

This information should guide staff in determining whether an extension of the lease makes sense, and if it does, what kind of terms and conditions should be included to ensure that the city is getting as much value as possible from and the best possible use of its limited open space.

Sincerely,

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Jennifer Atkins and Judy Coleman, Co-Chairs	
Park and Recreation Commission	

² For example, at that time, there were seven city pools in addition to the water park. There are now only three City pools, with one slated to close for repair, and aquatics is a widely recognized area of significant need.